

In the Middle East, Biden Is on the Razor's Edge

by Riccardo Alcaro

US President Joe Biden is walking on thin ice while he attempts to deal with the most serious crisis in the Middle East since the ill-conceived US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Biden has orientated his administration's action along three tracks: supporting Israel; protecting as many Palestinian civilians as possible while also resuscitating the defunct Middle East peace process; and preventing the conflict from extending to the wider region.¹

The problem is, reconciling these three priorities may be impossible.

¹ White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the United States' Response to Hamas's Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia's Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine*, 20 October 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-hamass-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine>.

Priority #1: Supporting Israel

Biden's support for Israel, which he expressed most tangibly by travelling to Tel Aviv, ostensibly involves a US endorsement of the Israeli government's goal of eliminating Hamas, the Islamist group that controls Gaza.² Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has reaffirmed his government's commitment to that goal³ as the only possible response to the 7 October murderous attack by Hamas that left over 1,400 people dead, regardless of age and gender.⁴

² White House, *Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel Before Bilateral Meeting*, Tel Aviv, 18 October 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel-before-bilateral-meeting-tel-aviv-israel>.

³ John Reed, Felicia Schwartz and Demetri Sevastopulo, "Israel 'Preparing Ground Invasion' of Gaza, Says Netanyahu", in *Financial Times*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/e4e08e18-ad98-4c37-a620-570d3800d380>.

⁴ Doron Berti and Miron Maman, "Israelis Ink the

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Rooting out Hamas from Gaza is no insignificant feat. In fact, it warrants a massive military effort. The Islamist group may have between 15 and 40,000 fighters and, in all likelihood, is bracing itself for an Israeli ground invasion.⁵ Hamas counts on taking advantage of the hundreds of kilometres-long network of underground tunnels underneath Gaza to entangle Israeli troops in ferocious urban warfare, which would diminish the Israeli overwhelming advantage in technology and armaments.⁶

Priority #2: Protecting civilians

The course of the campaign, which is expected to be tough, bloody and with no guarantee of success, contrasts sharply with Biden's second priority, namely safeguarding civilian lives and relaunching Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy.

The air campaign that Israel has been conducting in preparation for the ground offensive has already caused massive losses. Palestinian sources speak of about 8,000 people killed in the air raids – again, the majority of

them civilians and over one thousand children.⁷

While hard to verify independently, these figures are not unrealistic. UN agencies still on the field have reported that about 670,000 Gazans have taken shelter in UN-designated areas and an estimated 1.4 million people have been displaced.⁸ Satellite images show entire neighbourhoods entirely flattened out by Israel's relentless bombardments.⁹ Adding misery to devastation is the mounting humanitarian crisis triggered by Israel's decision to cut fuel, electricity and food flows into Gaza and curtail water supply.¹⁰

The ground campaign cannot but worsen further the predicament of Gaza's Palestinians, who may be forced to seek refuge outside the Strip, although so far Egypt (which shares a border with Gaza) has ruled out the possibility of building refugee camps on its soil. It is worth emphasising that almost half of Gaza's 2.3 million people is already made up of refugees from previous conflicts.

Memory of Deadly Attacks onto Their Skin", in *Reuters*, 19 October 2023, <http://reut.rs/3tCnVx0>.

⁵ Loveday Morris and Steve Hendrix, "Documents Found on Fighters Reveal Hamas Capabilities, Bloody Plans", in *The Washington Post*, 22 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/21/hamas-documents-plans-israel-attack>.

⁶ Asa Fitch and Rory Jones, "Map: Tunnels Under Gaza Made by Hamas, Identified by Israel", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 October 2023, [CFR In Briefs, 23 October 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/node/249248>.](https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-war-gaza-strip-conflict/card/YY9IenGS27zQ0mIQvS5n;MaxBoot, 'Israel's Ground War Against Hamas: What to Know)

⁷ Wafaa Shurafa and Samy Magdy, "Palestinian Death Toll Passes 8,000 as U.N. Aid Warehouses Suffer Break-Ins", in *Time*, 29 October 2023, <https://time.com/6329691/gaza-palestinian-death-toll-aid-warehouses>.

⁸ OCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel. Flash Update #23*, 29 October 2023, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-23>.

⁹ Olive Enokido-Lineham, "Satellite Images Show Gaza Reduced to Rubble After Israeli Strikes", in *Sky News*, 12 October 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/from-the-sky-and-on-the-ground-gaza-destruction-revealed-after-israeli-strikes-12982465>.

¹⁰ Sari Bashi, "Israel Still Blocking Aid to Civilians in Gaza", in *HRW Dispatches*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/node/386289>.

Priority #3: Containing the war

Against this backdrop, preventing an escalation of the war beyond Gaza is going to be hard indeed for Biden. At the moment neither of Hamas' main allies, Iran and Hezbollah, the Islamist group that controls southern Lebanon, have an interest in joining the fight. Their preferred option would be to see Israeli forces suffering heavy casualties in Gaza during an operation that began eroding international support for Israel even before it had started.

However, if the ground offensive were to result in a massive displacement of Palestinians from Gaza or get near to the objective of annihilating Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah's calculus would most likely change.¹¹ Hezbollah and pro-Iran forces in Syria would retaliate by opening a new front along Israel's northern border with extensive launch of rockets and missiles (Hezbollah's arsenal is estimated to be far larger and more sophisticated than any other group in the area).¹²

Iran has fired warning shots by moving its proxy groups in Syria closer to the border with Israel and urging others to carry out minor drone and rocket attacks against US bases in Iraq and Syria itself.¹³ In the worst-case scenario, Iran would activate its allies

and proxies across the region to hit US targets. States that have normalised relations with Israel, like the United Arab Emirates, or were in the process of doing so before 7 October, like Saudi Arabia, could also come under fire, directly from the Houthis, the Iran-backed group in Yemen, or indirectly through sabotage and other forms of attacks in the Persian Gulf or the Gulf of Oman.

The point for Iran and its allies would be to pressure Washington and its Arab partners to curb Israel. But the United States is more likely to double down on its support for Israel rather than the other way round if a second (and a third, fourth...) front is open.

Is there a way out?

The plan to eliminate Hamas is thus hard to achieve militarily, extremely costly in terms of human losses and potentially explosive for its regional ramifications. In addition, it has for the moment not been linked to any political strategy.

Even if Hamas were destroyed to its last member, the problem of what to do with Gaza afterwards would remain. There are no credible solutions to this problem.¹⁴

A renewed Israeli occupation is not on the cards given its high military, political and economic costs and risks of exposing Israeli soldiers to constant

¹¹ Heiko Wimmen, "Deterrence between Israel and Hizbollah Must Hold", in *Crisis Group Commentaries*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/21634>.

¹² Missile Threat, *Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah*, last updated on 10 August 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/?p=4179>.

¹³ Institute for the Study of War, *Israel-Hamas War (Iran Updates)*, last updated on 29 October 2023, <https://understandingwar.org/node/5597>.

¹⁴ Lawrence Freedman, "No End in Sight: Israel's Search for a Gaza Strategy", in *Financial Times*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/03b8ea8a-891d-4457-811f-27448ced6c7b>.

attacks. Entrusting the Palestinian Authority (PA) with governing Gaza would also be problematic, given that the PA is already discredited in the eyes of most Palestinians and would be further delegitimised by the fact that it would be seen as an Israeli agent. Nor is it plausible that Arab countries – Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia being the most likely candidates – agree to take on the massive burden of running Gaza's 2.3 million people.

What, then, can the Biden Administration realistically hope to achieve?

The United States has reportedly been pushing the Israelis to accord preference to the liberation of the hundreds of hostages held captive by Hamas as well as to clarify what the objectives of the ground offensive are.¹⁵ The point is whether it is possible to keep the offensive below the threshold under which an escalation would become all but impossible to stop.

The implicit premise of this reasoning is that Israel could be content with degrading Hamas' military capabilities to the point it attains a permanent containment of it, but would not necessarily seek the total elimination of it.

This re-orientation of the ground offensive involves that it should be compatible with the resumption of aid flows into Gaza and the creation of safe zones for civilians, which is a tall order.

¹⁵ Edward Wong et al., "U.S. Advises Israel to Delay Gaza Invasion, Officials Say", in *The New York Times*, 22 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/22/us/politics/us-hostages-israel-gaza.html>.

It also involves that the vast deployment of forces to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea by the United States is sufficient to persuade Iran and Hezbollah to accept a significant downgrading of their Palestinian ally.¹⁶ As shown by the recent air strikes against Iranian proxies in Syria, the Biden Administration is willing to engage in limited military engagements to reinforce the message.¹⁷ Whether that is enough to deter Iran and Hezbollah remains to be seen, however.

A never-ending tragedy

Biden's diplomatic and military efforts are an instance of extreme balancing. The early stages of the Israeli ground offensive could in theory still be compatible with a re-orientation of its aims, yet that possibility diminishes by the day. If Biden fails to rebalance US diplomacy in keeping with all three priorities (and not just the first one), the prospect of a generalised conflict in the Middle East could materialise.

Such a conflict would involve immense human loss (even in the hundreds of thousands), massive insecurity spillovers into adjacent regions and probably a negative impact on the world economy. The United States would be drawn into a war it did not plan and in which its strategic interests are dubious

¹⁶ Jim Garamone, "DOD Officials Detail Department's Goals in Middle East", in *DOD News*, 24 October 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3566752>.

¹⁷ Felicia Schwartz and James Shotter, "US Strikes Iran-linked Targets in Syria", in *Financial Times*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/051074d1-189f-4d31-bf28-2434679a42d9>.

– certainly inferior to the imperative to defeat Russia in Ukraine and manage competition with China.

Even if the US president were to succeed in preventing an escalation, the risk of another outbreak of large-scale violence in Palestine would just be postponed by a few years into the future.

In the absence of a major diplomatic initiative for which neither the political conditions nor viable practical solutions are in sight, the reality of a decades-old occupation, in which the repression of basic human rights of millions of Palestinians will continue fuelling forms of extreme radicalism to which Israel cannot but respond with further violence, will remain unaltered.

That this bleak scenario is the best we can realistically hope for to avoid even worse developments is eloquent and disheartening evidence of the scale of the tragedy playing out in the Middle East.

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